

Seek Success, But Skip the Stress



Health and Wellness

As if being a single mother of two weren't enough, Krista Kurth was a high-powered consultant at a major accounting firm who was taking night classes toward a degree in organizational development. But when her body shut down with chronic fatigue syndrome, she realized that no motor could keep running without a pit stop.

Her two-year quest to recover taught her a lesson. The formula for success, she learned, must include mental and physical rest.

Millions of Americans have yet to grasp that fact. They believe that longer hours at work, combined with less recreation and relaxation, will lead them up the corporate ladder. The truth is that unchecked stress hinders more than it helps.

"People have the sense that they're important and successful if they're busy," says Dr. Kurth (yes, she went on to earn that Ph.D.). She also co-authored *Running on Plenty: Renewal Strategies for Individuals*, which offers advice on staying energized despite work demands.

Machines can run around the clock. But Dr. Kurth and co-author Suzanne Adele Schmidt, Ph.D., emphasize that people are living organisms who must stop and refuel to work properly. By not taking brief, hourly breaks, they say, you could take up to five times longer to complete tasks and grow more likely to make mistakes.

Research backs them up. In one study, 69 percent of people who reported feeling highly stressed on the job said the stress made them less productive, workplace stress expert Charles Spielberger, Ph.D., wrote in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. About half of those stressed-out people said they had suffered burnout, job-related medical problems or both.

A State of Alert

Overwhelming paperwork, deadlines, meetings, phone calls and emails cause your brain to order the production of hormones that put your body in a state of alert. Whether you know it or not, your body pools its resources to deal with the threat causing the stress. Your muscles tense, you breathe harder and your heart beats faster.

If this keeps up too long, your body cracks under the pressure. The result? Headaches, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, short tempers, upset stomachs and lower morale. All are early warning signs of job stress, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Some studies suggest this stress can lead to heart disease, depression, anxiety, muscle pain, cancer, ulcers, a weakened immune system and even suicide.

"It's a big problem and it's growing," says Dr. Spielberger, director of the University of South Florida's Center for Research and Behavioral Medicine and Health Psychology. "The world continues to change faster and faster, which puts more pressure on people to try to keep up."

Companies face more foreign competition. Downsizing increases workloads. Some employees feel less secure in jobs. New technologies were meant to make jobs easier. But cell phones, email, pagers, the Internet, mobile handheld devices and laptops have instead increased the pace. "We're expected to be available all the time," Dr. Kurth says. "People are expected to give an immediate answer."

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Setting boundaries and learning how to take “productivity pauses,” she says, will help you get more done, stay healthy and keep a positive attitude. These hourly mini-breaks can be as simple as taking three deep breaths or doing simple stretches. Gently roll your shoulders backward, move your head from side to side, elevate your arms to shoulder height and rotate at the waist.

Left Brain Break

Dr. Kurth suggests you take a break from using the left side of your brain, the half that handles job-related tasks like analysis and communication. You can do this by immersing yourself in acts that tap the right brain’s creative power. For example, you can take a brief mental vacation by closing your eyes and thinking about your favorite place. “Use all your senses.” If you like tropical resorts, “imagine what the sand feels like and what the ocean smells like,” she says. “Do it for a few minutes and you come back feeling refreshed.”

A great way to make breaks part of your day is to find a “renewal buddy” who will encourage you while benefiting from your support. If you’re a supervisor, you can create an office environment that allows for “play,” such as throwing Frisbees or knitting.

The worst stress is having a difficult boss who may be too critical or doesn’t provide enough support, Dr. Spielberger says. Changing your boss’s management style isn’t usually possible. Looking for a new job usually is.

